

***Blaming The Victim: How Global Journalism Fails Those in Poverty,*****Jairo Lugo-Ocando, Pluto Press, London, 2015, 224 pp,****ISBN 978 0 7453 3441 7, €30 Pbk**

Global poverty is a persistent (although usually episodic) element of contemporary news, yet we are often presented with “simplistic explanations of why and how people experience poverty.... explanations [which] largely reflect dominant discourses which are shaped by class ideology” (p.1). With some notable exceptions, little scholarly work has endeavoured to explain why journalism concentrates on the manifestation of poverty, rather than on the processes of inequality which cause and sustain it. That is not the case here. In *‘Blaming the Victim: How Global Journalism Fails Those in Poverty’*, Jairo Lugo-Ocando considers how (and why) the global news media fails to contextualise the issue of global poverty, resulting in a framing which distorts its causes and consequences, whilst also highlighting the important exceptions to the standardised way in which global media news presents poverty.

The key themes addressed in the text are:

- How the global North views the poor through the lenses of a small group of media owners and journalists.
- How those journalists understand poverty.
- How the global news media is influenced by conceptual frameworks developed through “undemocratic and unrepresentative organisations and institutions” (p.6).
- Journalistic practices and the environment in which they operate.
- Why journalists must reflect on their role in the dissemination of dominant ideologies if the coverage of global poverty is to evolve.
- Why news stories about poverty should be concerned with inequality.
- How journalistic ‘objectivity’ acts as a deterrent to social change.

Part one of the book (Chapters 1-3) deals with the subjectivity of poverty as a news issue and provides a history of how journalists and editors dealing with global poverty understand its causes and acquire their views. In essence it discusses why journalists working in this area - in the main - tend to overlook the root causes of poverty (global inequality) in their reporting of the issue, and ultimately it portrays the inhumanity of ‘objectivity’, which sees journalists choosing events and spokespeople which support hegemonic discourses. Lugo-Ocando

acknowledges that this is not as a result of conscious bias on the part of journalists or editors; rather it is the “by-product of a systemic process in which ideological rituals are performed in the construction and legitimation of news” (p.65). Thus a key explanatory argument advanced in this section is that most journalists and editors lack any first-hand experience of poverty and so their understandings of the issue are derived from hierarchical education systems etc., which continually reproduce existing hierarchical power structures.

Part 2 of the book (Chapters 4-5) explores the symbolic and visual construction of poverty in the news agenda. Chapter 4 rather excellently considers how Africa has been depicted as an “‘issue’ characterised by the four Ds: disease, disaster, debt and death” (p.85), with little contextual reference being given to the impact of (post)colonialism or Neoliberalism on contemporary African societies. Chapter 5 explores the powerful (yet simultaneously simplified and dramatized) visual constructions which have shaped the issue of poverty. We are shown how such images (mainly) feminise and infantilise global poverty, and in the process underpin ethnocentric stereotypes of helplessness and inaction, with the only adequate response thus being western intervention. Interestingly, Lugo-Ocando argues that the core of such practices is “the marketization of visual morality in which ‘choice’ is inscribed in the neoliberal discourses to denote the supposed ability to ‘do something’, when in reality it just fosters a different type of passivity and corruption” (pp.108-109).

Part 3 of the book (Chapters 6-7) is likely to be of most interest to the readership of this journal, in that it makes a compelling argument that we need to look at how ‘spin doctors’, PR groups and NGO’s use poverty and ‘natural’ disasters to advance specific agendas. What is happening with the news coverage of global poverty mirrors what is happening in many other areas of the media at present. The author thus usefully examines how changing journalistic work practices have seen an increase in ‘news shapers’ (Soley 1992) providing opinions, often at the expense of any input from those directly affected by the phenomena / event in question. This section also offers an insight into whether the emergence of alternative media voices can transform the media’s coverage of poverty. Using Al-Jazeera as a case study Lugo-Ocando indicates that “different agendas can be successful in creating a different cognitive environment and that the media in the developing world can reflect different realities in the news by taking different approaches to the news” (p.164).

Despite the many constraints identified in this book, in the conclusion Lugo-Ocando theorises on the possible future coverage of poverty in the media, and argues that global journalism has the potential to affect structural change, and “cultivate a distinctive form of knowledge in relation to poverty and inequality” (p.165). He suggests that a process which democratises the media is essential if journalism is to change and provide a real voice for the excluded, and as importantly, if the media wishes to reclaim its important position as the ‘Fourth Estate’ (see Shultz 1998). For this to happen Lugo-Ocando argues that journalism must return to its “pamphletarian’ roots” and yet again become a profession whose practitioners strive for the possibility of delivering social justice. “This is what the news coverage of poverty should be all about” (p.176)

In conclusion, this is an important multifaceted book, whose biggest contribution to the field is the manner in which it reframes how journalists (and indeed all of us in the global North) should think (and write) about the persistent injustice of global poverty. It is a very constructive and stirring read.

#### **References:**

Shultz, J. (1998) *Reviving the Fourth Estate: Democracy, Accountability and the Media*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Soley, L. (1992) *The News Shapers. The Sources Who Explain the News*, New York: Praeger.

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